SILVERTON – The challenges to the survival of The Oregon Garden continue to mount.

Over the past two decades, the 80-acre botanical garden in southwest Silverton has weathered significant debt, a recession and changes in management. But in most years, it has still attracted more than 100,000 visitors.

This year has been its biggest challenge.

The Garden closed for seven weeks in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for over a week in September due to smoke from wildfires, and now it will have to close Nov. 18 until at least Dec. 2 after Gov. Kate Brown's latest executive order.

When it has been open, far fewer people have come than in a normal year.
Oregon Garden Foundation development director Allison Pennell said the foundation assumed management Nov. 3 after Moonstone Garden Management, which had run the garden for the past 15 years, defaulted on its financial obligations.

"It is a really exciting opportunity because now the garden is completely a public, non-profit partnership with the city of Silverton and the foundation," Pennell said. "It's just another opportunity to retell the story of the Oregon Garden because there have been a lot of misconceptions along the way."
Oregon Garden Foundation takes over management of garden in rocky year

In a news release, Moonstone said mounting losses forced it to turn over operations at the foundation’s request.

**Money:** After forgiving $6 million in debt, Marion County lets Oregon Garden stand on its own

"Moonstone Garden Management Inc. and its management still love the nonprofit Garden and hope it succeeds with the Foundation," the statement read.

Moonstone will continue to operate the Oregon Garden Resort, a 103-room hotel adjacent to the property.

Moonstone, under the name Garden Resort Silverton, received a Payroll Protection Program loan of more than $350,000 in the spring, saying it has 186 employees.

A botanical garden is born

Silverton purchased the site for the garden in 1995 and partnered with the Oregon Association of Nurseries on the project that became The Oregon Garden. It opened in 1999 under the management of the Oregon Garden Foundation.

But after initially high attendance, it lost hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Marion County issued $5 million in revenue bonds to keep it afloat in 2002. After it continued to lose money, the garden was placed in the receivership of Marion County in 2005 with $8 million in debt.

Moonstone Garden Management, an arm of California-based Moonstone Hotel Properties, took over management of the garden in 2006 with the Oregon Garden Foundation remaining in a support role and Moonstone paying to manage the resort.
"In the past, we facilitated donations and I have been very active in procurement and in-kind donations and grants," Pennell said.

**Garden:** After a career as Marion County’s ‘fixer,’ John Lattimer steps into retirement

Moonstone purchased 11 acres adjacent to the garden and opened the hotel in 2008.

After making payments for the garden for over a decade, Marion County in 2018 essentially forgave $6 million in debt. About $1 million in debt remained, and that was projected to be paid off in six to eight years.

The foundation receives funding from a tax when people rent rooms at the resort.

“We’ve actually been able to pay back a good amount of our early debt, and we’re working on that,” Pennell said. “COVID also obviously affected the hotel revenue. So we have some earlier projections, but we’re kind of reconfiguring that.”

Moonstone took out loans of over $1 million to maintain the garden over the past 15 years, according to a news release.

"Moonstone Garden Management Inc. has requested additional funding from the Foundation and the City of Silverton, but none has been provided," it said in a statement.

**COVID-19 stops recent progress**

https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/oregon-garden-foundation-ta...wAR0ci3g2c7zNlyWpWa_zeDfn1NMzPbzgLNYQBuDww39TS0Cj0MwpHAPAI
In the past few years, The Oregon Garden Foundation had received grants to help maintain and improve the facility.

In late 2018, Marion County gave the garden a grant to purchase a new tram to replace the current one. The foundation also received a grant from Silverton for new plants and a ginkgo tree from Hiroshima, Japan for its new Peace Garden.

It purchased the tram and had it ready to go before the pandemic. But it never got a chance to run.

"We were so excited about that," Pennell said. "We are one of only a few gardens that has that accessibility for all people."

**Debt:** After forgiving $6 million in debt, Marion County lets Oregon Garden stand on its own

In a normal year, the Oregon Garden is most popular during the spring and has events that draw large numbers of people. But it had to cancel those.

Then the garden closed for more than a week in September – another peak time for visitors – when Silverton was placed on evacuation level 2 due to wildfires and poor air quality.

The foundation planned to have the garden open this winter from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays, but now the garden will have to close from at least Nov. 18 to Dec. 2 under the new regulations.

"We knew that winter would be hard with COVID and with revenue," Pennell said.

Brittney Hatteberg, the director for marketing and communications for Moonstone, said the hotel will remain open during the garden's closure and it will have a light display available only to guests.
Support from volunteers, members

Before the pandemic, the garden had about 20 people working there.

During the first closure in March, most of the staff was laid off. A few staff members and volunteers remained to care for the sprawling 80-acre tract full of plants.

It now has about seven employees under the new management.

Pennell said the garden has about 100 volunteers, with a core group of 40 to 50. Hundreds more have volunteered for one-time projects.

“Before COVID we had some volunteers that helped us process memberships and helped with some of the day-to-day administrative tasks,” she said. “But we haven’t figured out how to get those back because our audience and our population are in the high-risk group.”

Garen: Volunteer in 2020: Here are some ways to give back in the Salem area

Pennell said fundraising and memberships — there are about 3,000 active members — will have to keep them afloat as the pandemic numbers remain high.

Fundraising events for the foundation will take place online.

“There’s just a lot of misconceptions that people think we’re fully funded or think we’re owned by a private company, and we’re definitely city of Silverton land and it’s nice that now the non-profit can be more front and center about it for fundraising,” Pennell said.

Bill Poehler covers Marion County for the Statesman Journal. Contact him at bpoehler@statesmanjournal.com or Twitter.com/bpoehler

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